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Theology of Persecution and Martyrdom; an Example in Globalizing Theology

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I Introduction

1. The challenge for theology

Much of popular missiology in recent decades has been dominated by lopsided emphases, sometimes called a managerial missiology,¹ asking, 'what must we organize?' or a pragmatic missiology, claiming, 'if it works, it must be good'. Often these approaches have in common a tendency towards a 'theology of glory and success', sidelining a 'theology of the cross'. The reality of suffering, persecution or martyrdom is bypassed.

However, according to latest sociological research, two thirds of the

world's population live in countries with serious restrictions of religious freedom. Christians in these countries number at least 200 million. I refer to the websites of the IIRF, the US Department of State, advocacy agencies, and reference works for current experiences of persecution.²

The focus of this presentation is the theological reflection of persecution and martyrdom, not the reality itself.

2. Globalization of perspectives

Rarely have western theologies engaged in much detail with the reality of suffering, persecution and martyrdom for Christ and its significance for mis-

1 For a criticism of the reduction of world missions to a managerial enterprise, see James F. Engel and William A Dyrness, *Changing the mind of world missions: where have we gone wrong?* (Downers Grove, 2000), 67-74.

2 For the most comprehensive descriptions of persecution of Christians, see Ronald Boyd-MacMillan, *Faith that endures: the essential guide to the persecuted church* (Lancaster: Sovereign World, 2006); for restrictions of religious freedom, see Paul A. Marshall (ed.), *Religious freedom in the world* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008); on the various approaches for researching persecution, see Christof Sauer, 'Researching persecution and martyrdom'. *IJRF* 1 (2008), 26-48.

sion. Christian thinking seems to be that persecution is something of the past. A few might know it is happening elsewhere, but the general assumption seems to be, 'it will never happen here'.³ So the topic seems irrelevant and is largely ignored by western theology.

But who says that the western perspective is all sufficient, normative, or the decisive one? Should not a contemporary theology seriously explore a topic that is of very obvious, immediate, painful relevance to large parts of global Christianity? After all, it is a topic which permeates Scripture! Could it be that on closer study the topic might be of more relevance for us than we are accustomed to think, and that an exercise in globalization of theology might uncover some of our blind spots and correct our theology?

3. The example of the Bad Urach Consultation

In September 2009, possibly for the first time, an international group of theologians and missiologists gathered in Germany, in a place called Bad Urach, to develop an evangelical theology of suffering, persecution and martyrdom for the global church in mission.⁴ A

major rationale for this consultation was that the church seems ill-equipped for the suffering that comes with its mission in the world.⁵ The participants issued the extensive *Bad Urach Statement* of eighty pages length with the subtitle, 'Towards an evangelical theology of suffering, persecution and martyrdom for the global church in mission'.⁶ I would like to introduce some of the outcomes here, and invite the reader to examine it as an exercise in global theology.

II Theology of Persecution and Martyrdom

This can merely be a sketch of the theological core of the consultation statement which is much more detailed and also deals with a number of further perspectives. It tries to overcome current misperceptions and distorted terminology concerning suffering, persecution, and martyrdom. It also extensively deals with responding to suffering, persecution, and martyrdom from an ethical and application perspective at the level of the individual, the local church, Christian networks beyond the local level, and the global Christian community. Finally it recommends practical

3 For a detailed discussion on current (mis-) perceptions on persecution see Charles Tieszen, *Re-examining religious persecution: constructing a theological framework for understanding persecution* (Kempton Park: AcadSA Publishing, 2008), 17-36 (Online: www.iirf.eu).

4 The consultation was organized by the International Institute for Religious Freedom (www.iirf.eu), sponsored by the World Evangelical Alliance Religious Liberty Commission, in co-operation with a number of other commissions.

5 Cf. WEA, 'Statement on prosperity theology and theology of suffering by the Theological Commission of the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) in 1994'. *ERT* 20:1 (1996), 5-13.

6 The *Bad Urach Statement* has been summarized in *The Bad Urach Call*, which is a short and more popular appeal. Both can be found at www.iirf.eu and are published as part of the compendium on the Bad Urach Consultation: Christof Sauer and Richard Howell, Richard (eds.), *Suffering, persecution and martyrdom: Theological reflections* (Kempton Park: AcadSA / Bonn: VKW, 2010).

applications both for Christian mission and for theological education.

1. The drama of God's history with the world

Obviously, the way we view Scripture will influence what we will find in it. Only a comprehensive view of God's cosmic plans, as far as they are revealed to us in Scripture, will help us to properly interpret suffering, persecution and martyrdom and its relation to mission. A salvation-historical approach to interpreting the Bible and to doing theology seems very helpful in that regard.⁷ The suffering of the church for Christ is so much a part of her mission in the period between Christ's ascension and his parousia that suffering has been declared a mark of the church by theologians.

2. Old Testament models of faithfulness

In contemporary Christianity it is quite common to bypass the Old Testament, going straight to the New Testament on any issue. However, suffering, persecution and martyrdom have been the lot of God's people over and over again, all through the Old Testament Scriptures, beginning with the martyrdom of Abel. Job exemplifies the suffering of the righteous allowed by God, and he serves as a typology of Christ. Conflict, persecution, and martyrdom were all characteristics of the true prophets (Neh. 9:26; Mt. 23:37). The election of Israel as the people of God brought

along with it suffering for its calling at the hands of the nations, beginning with her slavery in Egypt. However, often the cause of Israel's suffering was God's punishment for Israel's unfaithfulness to Yahweh (e.g. Lev. 26:14-39).

3. Christ the suffering servant

Jesus Christ as the centre of our faith plays the normative role in our view of suffering, persecution and martyrdom. Therefore it is crucial how we interpret his life and death. The way of Jesus, the Messiah, through suffering to glory is exemplary for his disciples. All Christian martyrdom has its basic foundational orientation and footing in Jesus Christ, the 'faithful and true witness' (Rev. 1:5; 3:14; cf. 1 Pet. 2:21-24; Heb. 2:14-18; 5:8). From his earliest childhood, Jesus was persecuted, and his first sermon met with bitter resistance. Finally, he stood up as a witness to the truth during his questioning before the judges (Jn. 18:37). To Jesus, the crucifixion was not at all a tragic failure of his mission, but rather its very fulfilment.

4. Discipleship: following in the footsteps of Christ

A key question in any theology of martyrdom is, how the cross of Christ relates to the cross of his disciples. The death of Jesus on the cross is both unique, compared to the cross of his followers, and at the same time serves as a model for his followers. Jesus' death on the cross as an atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world as a substitutionary act is unique, completely sufficient, irreplaceable, unrepeatable, and cannot be copied. However, this does not negate the fact that as our

⁷ In exegesis this approach was propagated by Oscar Cullmann, and in missiology by Peter Beyerhaus.

representative Jesus gave us a model to follow.⁸

Therefore Christian suffering for Christ is a continuation of the suffering of Christ, and it is from him only that it receives its characteristic mark (Jn. 17:18; 20:21). His disciples are treated today as he once was, because Christ lives in them and they speak and act with his authority. Their fate is united with his. The core meaning of taking up one's cross in the discipleship of Jesus (Lk. 9:23) is witnessing to Jesus Christ, even in a situation of persecution and martyrdom.⁹

5. Super-human conflict

Here is another dimension that cannot be appropriately assessed when examining persecution and martyrdom with the means of secular sciences only. From a theological perspective, the world's hatred toward Christians is ultimately inspired by the even deeper hatred of Satan, who has been fighting against God ever since his primeval rebellion against him. Because Jesus totally stripped him of his power on Calvary, the anger of the dark powers is directed completely against Jesus and all who confess him.

Jesus saw his ministry as an assault on the rule of Satan in the world with the purpose of bringing in the rule of God or the kingdom of God. Jesus was sent as the Lamb of God to defeat the great dragon and to destroy his works

(1 Jn. 3:8). In the same way, he sends us as lambs to defeat the wolves by transforming them into children of God. Christ's ultimate weapon is self-sacrifice and our ultimate weapon must be the same, in order to draw people to Jesus (Jn. 12:24,26,32).¹⁰

The church suffers because of the hatred towards Christ by the world in rebellion against God (cf. John 15:20a). It is difficult to fully explain the irrational brutality of the persecution of Christians without taking into regard a demonic component in it. In the midst of such a stark realism of conflict, the church can be assured that no enemy or adversity is able to separate the believer from the love of Christ (Rom. 8:31-39).¹¹

6. God's salvation and comfort

Jesus points out the seriousness of remaining faithful to him and confessing him in moments of trial. Those who endure to the end and remain victorious will be saved (Mt. 24:13, Rev. 21:7-8).

While Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as well as God's angels, comfort and help the afflicted Christian (2 Cor. 1:3-11; Heb. 2:18; Mt. 10:17; Acts 5:18), God's helping presence does not relieve one of one's own responsibility to bear and to stand fast. God's help does not necessarily always have to consist of lives being spared. Some Christians, like James (Acts 12:2), receive God's help to remain faithful, despite torture and execution.

⁸ Young Kee Lee, 'God's mission in suffering and martyrdom', PhD diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, School of World Mission, 1999.

⁹ Glenn Penner, *In the shadow of the cross: a biblical theology of persecution and discipleship* (Bartlesville: Living Sacrifice, 2004), 116-54.

¹⁰ Joseph Ton, *Suffering, martyrdom and rewards in heaven* (Lanham, Md.: Univ. Press of America, 1997), 201-204.

¹¹ Christof Sauer, *Mission und Martyrium* (Bonn: VKW, 1994), 101.

There remains the question of what the suffering and martyrdom of a Christian can contribute to the salvation of others (Col. 1:24; 2 Tim. 2:10; Phil. 1:12-26). While the work of the messianic martyr Jesus is complete, Christ's suffering in the members of his body is not yet complete (Rev. 6:11). Paul's apostolic suffering is 'instrumental' suffering,¹² because it serves to bring the gospel to those who need to be saved, and to keep faithful those who have been saved.

7. The body of Christ

So far, at any time in history, there have always been some Christians who were more intensely persecuted and others, who were less under pressure. The question here is, how those less and those more persecuted should relate to each other.

A Christian never suffers alone and a Christian martyr never dies alone, but is always a part of the body of Christ which sustains him or her. The body of Christ needs to be understood in three dimensions, across time, across space, and across divides.

The Christian confessors and martyrs of the past and the present need to be rightly remembered. Those who are currently suffering, are to remember that Christians all over the world are going through the same kind of suffering (1 Pet. 5:9). The body of Christ throughout the world participates in the suffering of members of the body of its time, through information, prayer, support, suffering and rejoicing with them. If one part of the body suffers,

all parts are equally concerned (1 Cor. 12:26). There is the potential of ecumenical solidarity being built, when Christians of different confessions and denominations suffer together for Christ.

A complication is added in cases, where one Christian group is, or has been persecuting another Christian group or has been complicit with government repression against other groups. Then a healing of memories is necessary concerning persecution and martyrdoms caused by other Christians in the past.

A further point in these ecclesiological dimensions concerns group egotisms. Advocacy for persecuted Christians must never be sectarian, only focussing on those from one's own denomination or confession, by ignoring the plight of those with differing theological convictions. Martyrdom serves to build up the church because those suffering and martyred are blessed by God.¹³

8. God's mission for the church

Suffering and martyrdom are not ends in themselves, but serve God's mission right to the end of time, and are linked to mission by multiple relationships (Mt. 24:14). Suffering and the weakness of the witness are a mode of mission (2 Cor. 12:9f; 4:7-10), and martyrdom becomes the most radical form of witness.

¹² The term is coined by Lee, *God's mission in suffering*, 46-55.

¹³ ICN, *Readiness to suffer*, 1996 (online: www.institut-diakrisis.de/PDEnglishVersion.pdf); Peter Beyerhaus, 'Martyrdom—gate to the kingdom of heaven' in Beyerhaus, *God's kingdom and the utopian error* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1992), 163-179.

Witness to Christ is a core cause of suffering. While we might be perfect in contextualizing our message and in avoiding any unnecessary offence, as messengers of Christ, we must face the fact that the message of the cross has been, and always will be, a stumbling block to those without Christ (1 Cor. 1:18,23), and will attract the hostility of the world that does not accept the light coming into the world (Jn. 1:4,11). Suffering is also a test for the genuineness of our mission rather than a mishap to be avoided at all cost.

The widely quoted saying of the church father Tertullian, '*semen est sanguis Christianorum*',¹⁴ is often quoted out of context with a triumphalistic undertone as 'The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church'. This gives rise to the important question of how persecution and church growth are related. Does persecution automatically and always lead to church growth? Or is it rather growth of the church that leads to persecution?

A theologically reflected response must differentiate. Even the catastrophes of world history can be used by God as vehicles for the progress of his kingdom, and he seems to use them in particular. The willingness to suffer for Christ can give the message of those suffering a more convincing power. While the seed that falls into the ground will bear much fruit over time according to God's promise, martyrdom does not automatically produce visible and immediate church growth.

The 'fruit' of martyrdom remains a grace from God (Jn. 12:24). While in some places persecution has led to

the multiplication of the church, sometimes heavy persecution has completely destroyed or marginalized churches in other parts of the world. Martyrdom brings to a violent end the voice of that particular witness and might discourage the witness of others, or have the potential to silence the last and only witness.

9. The victory of the kingdom of God

What then should our expectations be regarding the future? The period in which we live, is marked by the tension between the victory of Christ that has already been accomplished and its visible consummation which has not yet taken place (Mt. 5:45; Rom. 8:19-22). Because Christ was raised from death, ascended to heaven and was installed as sovereign, we may rightly hope for a resurrection to a better life which gives us reason to stand firm and immovable in affliction, and reassures us that our work for God is not in vain, though deadly forces might seemingly destroy it (1 Cor. 15:58).

In contrast to optimistic visions of the future, dreaming of seamless transformation, the prophecies of the Bible foresee clearly an altogether troubled final stage of human and church history (Dt. 7; 1 Thess. 2; 2 Tim. 3:1-13; Rev. 13-19). Both the worldwide proclamation of the gospel to all ethnic groups and distress reach a climax with the passing away of the old world and the completion of the new (Mt. 24:9-25; Rev. 17:6; 6:9-11). This encourages each generation to discern and endure historically and locally-restricted preliminary forms of persecution in their own times as anticipations on a small-

¹⁴ Tertullian, *Apol* 50,13.

er scale of what is to follow later (1 Jn. 2:18).¹⁵

Christians should not focus on the horrors of the coming end times, but they should joyfully¹⁶ expect their returning Lord, as bridegroom, judge and king (Rev. 19:6-10; 21:1-5; 16:5-6). God is not in a hurry with his final victory. Rather he is patient with humankind because he does not want anyone to perish, but wants to give everyone an opportunity for repentance (2 Pet. 3:4,9).

10. The honour of God and his martyrs

In the end, a crucial question is: What does God think of martyrdom? Again, there are various aspects to a biblical response. God is honoured both by the life and by the death of his witnesses (Rom. 14:8; 12:1; Phil. 1:20; Acts 20:24). God is honoured by the witness in weakness (2 Cor. 12:9-10) to a seemingly foolish gospel (1 Cor. 1:18-31), and the faithfulness of the martyrs (Jn. 21:18-19), as well as by the church's confidence in his reign (Acts 4:23-30), and the occasional conversion of persecutors (1 Pet 2:12; Phil 2:6-11). Honouring God is the eternal destiny of God's children (Rev. 7:9-17; 15:2-4; 19:2). The glorification of God is the ultimate goal of mission, and everything must in the end serve his glory.

This leads us to interesting and debated questions: 'Does God reward faithfulness? When and how?'

We can differentiate three scenar-

ios. God bestows his glory already in this life on those who suffer for him, lets some martyrs have a glimpse of his glory in their hour of trial, and in heaven lets them share the glory of Christ (1 Pet. 4:14; Acts 7:55). But beyond the association with God's glory in this life, those suffering and martyred are led through temporal suffering to eternal glory and are honoured by God (1 Pet. 1:11; Heb. 2:9; Rom. 8:17-18; 1 Pet. 4:13-14).

More specifically, the Bible promises a heavenly reward to the faithful.¹⁷ The character formation and the testing of our faithfulness accomplished in suffering, persecution or martyrdom for Christ have clear corresponding results in heaven (Rev. 3:12,21; 20:4; Lu. 22:28-30; 2 Cor. 4:17). The content of the promised reward is being heirs with Christ, being glorified with him (Rom. 8:17) and reigning with him (2 Tim. 2:12).

These promises are a great source of inspiration, courage and strength for the Christians who are called to face persecution and martyrdom. Suffering and martyrdom are not human achievements to boast about, but it is the grace of God that enables us to go victoriously through such sufferings.

III Conclusion

The authors of the *Bad Urach Statement* are specifically calling on theologians, missiologists and Christian leaders to consider this message in view of fulfilling together in joint obedience the mission to which God has called us. They encourage you to:

15 ICN, *Readiness to suffer*.

16 Ajiht Fernando, *The call to joy and pain: embracing suffering in your ministry* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2007).

17 Ton, *Suffering, martyrdom and reward*.

- study the *Bad Urach Statement* personally in the light of scripture,
- assess what relevance it has for you and your ministry,
- reflect how this statement could be used at your level of responsibility.

If we take a step back now and revisit the issue of globalizing theology, I see a need to move forward in two directions. Firstly, more non-western theologians need to be discovered who have reflected on that topic.¹⁸ Also, they could address deficits in western theology in a more differentiated manner. Taking note of the treasures hidden in oblivion or behind language barriers is a challenge.¹⁹

18 The contributing works of those who have participated in the discussion process surrounding the Bad Urach Consultation are listed in the references, whether they are explicitly quoted in this essay or not.

19 One such hidden treasure largely unknown outside the German speaking world is

Secondly, this exercise in globalizing theology has remained within the evangelical tradition. At the consultation in Bad Urach we have discussed the need to engage into conversations with Oriental and Eastern orthodox, Roman-Catholic and liberation theology approaches to the topic.

In presenting these thoughts on a theology of suffering, I personally want to encourage all readers to boldly pursue witness to the crucified and risen Christ, even in the face of suffering, persecution, and martyrdom. And doing so humbly, inspired and enabled by Christ to loving sacrifice.

the missiological interpretation of suffering for Christ by Karl Hartenstein. Cf. Christof Sauer, 'Towards a theology of "mission under the cross", a contribution from Germany by Karl Hartenstein'. In *Suffering, persecution and martyrdom*, edited by Christof Sauer et al. (Kempton Park: AcadSA / Bonn: VKW, 2010), 257-85.

Calvin, Barth, and Reformed Theology

Edited by Neil B. MacDonald and Carl R. Trueman

Karl Barth and John Calvin belong to the first rank of great theologians of the Church. Both, of course, were also Reformed theologians. Historically, Calvin's influence on Reformed doctrine has been much greater than that of Barth's, and continues to be so in the present day. In contrast, Barth's Reformed credentials have been questioned – not least in his understanding of election and atonement. The question is: who should be of greater importance for the Reformed church in the twenty-first century? Who has the better arguments on the Bible? Barth or Calvin? Doctrinal areas of focus are the nature of the atonement, Scripture, and the sacraments.

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